

An Introduction to the Parables

The parables comprise more than one-third of the recorded teachings of Jesus. While they contain some of the most profound lessons taught by Him, at the same time they comprise some of His simplest, most easily understood lessons.

The writers of the New Testament, while using allegories and similitudes, do not use the story parable as Jesus did though it is found occasionally in the Old Testament such as the parabolic story of a vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7 and the parable Nathan spoke to David (2 Samuel 12:1-7). In the New Testament, though, its use seemed to be unique to Jesus which was a fulfillment of prophecy (Compare Matthew 13:34-35 with Psalm 78:2 and Matthew 13:13-14 with Isaiah 6:9-10).

By the time of His ministry which is recorded in Matthew 12 and 13, Jesus' form of public instruction had become principally parabolic. Why? Their leaders and the people as a whole had hardened their hearts against Him and His message because they were filled with prejudice, moral hardness, blindness, and willful ignorance. As opposition to Him grew in intensity, so did His parables in their force, solemnity, and number. His purpose in them reflected the conditions which prompted Him to teach in such a way.

Parable Defined

- A. Many people define a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," but such a definition is not broad enough to include all the parables.
 1. Luke 4:23, by the above definition, would have to be called a proverb.
 2. Mark 7:15-17, by the above definition, would be a kind of riddle that would prompt the hearer to ask, "What is there that comes out of me that is more important than what I take in?"
- B. "Literally denotes a placing beside, (akin to *paraballo*, to throw or lay beside, to compare). It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison." (W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 840)
- C. It is derived from the Greek word "*parabole*" that comes from two other Greek words.
 1. "*Ballo*" (verb): "to throw or cast."
 2. "*Para*" (preposition): "alongside of."
 3. "That which is thrown alongside of," thus resulting in a comparison.
- D. Generally speaking, a parable is a comparison or analogy drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson. In the parables of Jesus there are comparisons of spiritual realities and natural occurrences.
- E. A parable is not the same thing as an allegory.
 1. In ancient and medieval times it was customary to treat the parables of Jesus as allegories. Some still treat them that way today.
 2. Allegory defined.
 - a. "An allegory in the Gk. came to signify 'to speak so that the facts stated are applied to illustrate principles.'" (Vine, 49)
 - b. "The veiled presentation, in a figurative story, of a meaning metaphorically implied but not expressly stated. That which figuratively stands for something else." (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*)

3. An allegory is like a parable in that it is a story told to make a comparison but their difference lies in the fact that every detail in an allegory has an inner meaning while in a parable the details are not necessarily significant but are often there only to add color to the story.
4. An illustration of the use of allegories is found in Galatians 4:24-31.
 - a. Hagar and Sarah are used to contrast the old and new covenants.
 - b. Every detail in this allegory corresponds to something.

The Purposes of Parables

- A. While the New Testament does not state, in so many words, the exact purpose of the parabolic teaching of Jesus, it implies it in Matthew 13:10-13: "And the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?' He answered and said to them, 'Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.'" (New King James Version)
- B. The four goals of parables.
 1. **The revelation of truth.**
 - a. Parables often reveal more truth than a plain statement would.
 - b. Those who, with a proper attitude, were seeking truth would be able to understand more (Matthew 13:11-12) because they had seeing eyes and hearing ears. (Matthew 13:16)
 - c. Christ revealed deep spiritual truths in a way easy for His disciples to understand.
 2. **The concealment of truth.** (Matthew 13:11-14)
 - a. The use of parables did not make Jesus' teaching plain to all who heard it because, having no appreciation for it, some of His hearers would not seek to understand it for they loved darkness more than light. (John 3:19-21)
 - b. The concealment of truth is not inconsistent with God. Consider Romans 1:28 and 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12.
 3. **The preservation of truth.**
 - a. Parables are set forth in a vivid, striking form which commands attention and impresses the memory thus making them easy to recall.
 - b. Their use is especially beneficial to those who are just beginning to study spiritual things because it enables them to feed upon simpler things and to retain the stories more easily than just plain facts.
 4. **The elicitation of truth from those otherwise reluctant to acknowledge it.**
 - a. Nathan's parable to David caused David to condemn himself. (2 Samuel 12:1-7)
 - b. The parable of the wicked husbandmen spoken by Jesus to the Jews caused the Jews, in effect, to admit that God would be just in destroying them for their wickedness. (Matthew 21:23-46)

Understanding Parables

- A. It is impossible to lay down strict rules for understanding parables.
 1. For example, in some parables small details have significance while in others details are not important.

2. "The primary lesson or lessons of a parable must be grasped but not each and every detail is always to be forced to yield a distinct lesson. Parables are like pictures, in that they require details to make up the general picture but without each detail having of necessity a special and separate lesson. It may or may not be so." (G.H. Lang, *The Parabolic Teaching of Scripture*, p. 17)
- B. In general, a parable has one central meaning.
1. In most cases, the details or incidents of the parable are merely "drapery," i.e., they serve as the background for the main thought or lesson.
 2. Some incidents, though, have meanings which are given by Jesus Himself.
- C. "In understanding the parables of Jesus, there are at least six points that we need to remember. (1) 'The material of parables may be real or fictitious.' (2) 'The material of parables may be borrowed from nature or from human life.' (3) 'The purely fanciful details of a parable may correspond accurately to the men who are instructed, and to their doings.' (4) 'Parts or the whole of a parable may be prophecy.' (5) 'The essential lesson taught is the main matter; details may or may not have separate significance.' (6) 'Application of details not explained must be on the lines of explanations given; then they will be sober and valuable, not fanciful or idle. Then also they will harmonize naturally with the whole picture, will add to its completeness, heighten its effect, and will not be foreign to it or irrelevant to the main lesson.'" (Lang, 17-18)

Conclusion

A very careful reading and study of the parables of Jesus will prove to be a great blessing to you. Giving serious consideration to their lessons will allow you to gain much knowledge and wisdom.